Volume 19 Issue 2 (August) 2024

TikTok Influencers' Credibility and Its Impact on Local Cosmetic Purchase Intention

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Received Date: 24 May 2024 Accepted Date: 24 June 2024 Revised Date: 3 July 2024 Published Date: 31 July 2024

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ABSTRACT

Influencer marketing has become a highly profitable strategy in today's marketing landscape, with TikTok emerging as a significant platform influencing consumer behaviour. This study examines the impact of TikTok influencers on the Malaysian cosmetic industry, focusing on credibility traits (i.e., trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness) and their influence on consumers' purchase decisions. Using a quantitative approach, data were collected via an online Google Form survey targeting female TikTok users aged 18 to 34, who are currently residing in the Greater Kota Kinabalu area. The study adjusts established measurement items for TikTok and analysed data using SmartPLS 4.0. Results indicate that the trustworthiness and attractiveness of TikTok influencers positively affect consumers' intention to purchase local cosmetics, while expertise shows no significant impact, possibly due to the target audience's age and familiarity with cosmetics. These findings have practical implications for cosmetic brands, highlighting the importance of trustworthiness and physical attractiveness in influencer endorsements, thus offering valuable insights for the cosmetic industry.

Keywords: attractiveness, cosmetics, expertise, purchase intention, source credibility, trustworthiness

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary marketing landscape, there is a strategy that has not only gained a lot of attention but was also acknowledged to be highly profitable, and that is influencer marketing. This type of marketing boasts an impressive average return of \$5.20 for every dollar invested. It sometimes can go up to \$20, making it one of the top choices of marketing strategy among marketers (Schaffer, 2023). Social media influencers, commonly known as SMIs, are taking the lead in this marketing transformation. These online personas have evolved beyond mere marketing tools to influential figures in consumer engagement, thanks to their unique capabilities to embody authenticity, a highly sought-after trait by consumers (Janssen et al., 2022; Vrontis et al., 2021).

While platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter have traditionally been established choices for influencer marketing, TikTok has quickly risen to prominence despite being released less than ten years ago. This emergence is supported by findings from a survey conducted by WARC (2021), which revealed that 80% of TikTok users reported that the platform had helped them get ideas about brands and products they never thought of before. Moreover, a survey conducted by Adweek reinforced this trend, revealing that 49% of users openly admitted to making purchasing decisions influenced by TikTok advertisements, promotions, or reviews (Hale, 2021). This shows that TikTok is a highly relevant platform for both brands and marketers.

Given the intensifying competition within various business sectors, capitalising on TikTok's emergence can become advantageous. With a 95% penetration rate, Malaysia was dubbed to have the third-highest TikTok penetration in the world (Statista, 2023c). Consequently, utilising TikTok influencers can be a highly effective strategy, particularly when targeting Malaysian consumers. One industry that stands to benefit from this trend is the Malaysian cosmetic industry. This industry has evolved into a profitable and lucrative domain and is expected to achieve a revenue of 3.15 billion in 2023, with an anticipated annual growth rate of 2.59% (CAGR 2023-2028) (Statista, 2023a). However, it is noteworthy that despite the growth of the cosmetic industry in Malaysia, Malaysians still strongly prefer foreign cosmetic products over local ones, with foreign brands like Maybelline, Mary Kay, and Mac dominating the market share in Malaysia (Tan, 2020). This trend contradicts the initiatives aimed at encouraging Malaysians to support their local products. Fundamentally, purchasing local products can reduce dependence on foreign goods, stimulate local industries, generate job opportunities, foster community bonds, and ultimately contribute to an increase in the national gross domestic product (Ayob & Hussain, 2016; Young, 2022). These benefits will be difficult or almost impossible to attain if Malaysians continue to make foreign products their top choices when purchasing. Hence, this calls for identifying the key determinants that encourage the purchase intent of local cosmetic products among consumers.

As SMIs have been proven effective, the current study seeks to gain insights into how they can influence people's intention to purchase. Research and surveys have been undertaken to examine the factors that determine the effectiveness of SMIs, and most studies agree that credibility is one of the most critical characteristics an influencer should possess (Balaban & Mustătea, 2019; Lee & Kim, 2020). In measuring source credibility, the seminal work of Ohanian (1990) has been widely used by numerous scholars. However, while researchers have extensively studied the role of source credibility in product/brand endorsement, the research has primarily focused on celebrity endorsements, with limited studies conducted on SMIs. Scholars have been calling for a revisit of source credibility in the context of SMIs (Chekima et al., 2020). Although several studies have been conducted, most have focused on platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook, with studies focusing on TikTok being scarce.

Therefore, by drawing upon Source Credibility Theory, the primary objective of this research is to bridge existing knowledge gaps by elucidating the factors influencing consumers' intention to purchase local cosmetic products. More specifically, the current study assesses the ramifications of TikTok influencers' credibility traits, namely, trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness, on consumers' purchase intentions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media Influencers

SMIs can be defined as individuals who hold significant power in shaping the opinions and attitudes of their followers through their prominent presence on social media platforms such as Blogs, Twitter, and others. (Freberg et al., 2011; Khamis et al., 2017). They are defined by their substantial online following, distinctive brand persona, and established affiliations with commercial sponsors (Duffy, 2021) and can be classified under five types of influencers, namely, celebrity influencers, mega-

influencers, macro-influencer, micro-influencers, and nano-influencer, which is mainly determined based on the size of their social media audience (Vrontis et al., 2021).

The influence of SMIs on consumers' purchase decisions is apparent. Based on a survey conducted by Rakuten Insight in 2023, 79% of Malaysian respondents follow SMIs on social media, with most admitting having purchased an item because it was recommended by an influencer (Statista, 2023b). From this, it is apparent that SMIs can influence consumer choices (Hassan et al., 2021; Ki et al., 2020; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020), making them an invaluable tool in shaping consumers' perceptions of brands. Hence, with the growing popularity of SMIs, we believe it is vital to explore what makes them effective in marketing to maximise their potential.

Source Credibility

According to Hovland and Weiss (1951), credibility in communication is the quality of being trusted, reliable, and believable, playing a vital role in shaping the audience's attention, comprehension, and retention of the message. It can also be referred to as the favourable attributes of a communicator that influence the recipients' willingness to accept a message (Ohanian, 1990). Credibility has the power to shape an individual's beliefs, opinions, attitudes, and behaviour (Hassan et al., 2021), making it a powerful criterion for influencing consumers (Eisend, 2004). In many studies regarding endorsements (Ohanian, 1990), the three-dimensional source credibility model, encompassing trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness, has gained substantial recognition and widespread utilisation. This model has primarily been employed in studies investigating the effectiveness of conventional celebrity endorsers (e.g., Amos et al., 2008; Pornpitakpan, 2004a; Zhu et al., 2022). However, with the evolving marketing landscape, SMIs have emerged as a preferred marketing tool over traditional celebrities. This shift can be attributed to the perception that SMIs possess greater credibility as product endorsers than traditional celebrities (Schouten et al., 2020).

Fundamentally, the Source Credibility Theory posits that a message is believable from a credible source (Pornpitakpan, 2004b). Consequently, researchers began applying Ohanian's model to assess the credibility of SMIs (e.g., Durau et al., 2022; Koay et al., 2022; Yılmazdoğan et al., 2021), unravelling the importance of credibility characteristics among SMIs. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that the body of literature concerning SMIs credibility characteristics remains relatively nascent and scarce. Additionally, findings from previous studies yielded inconsistencies, indicating inconclusiveness which calls for an imperative need for a more comprehensive and in-depth exploration of this topic. This study applies the Source Credibility Theory to evaluate how TikTok influencers' credibility impacts consumer behaviour, filling a gap in the literature. While several studies have applied this theory in studies regarding social media influencers broadly (e.g., Ooi et al., 2023; Durau et al., 2022; Filieri et al., 2023; Jhawar et al., 2023), this research is among the first to focus specifically on TikTok, providing new insights, and potentially setting a precedent for future research in this domain.

The Effects of TikTok Influencers' Trustworthiness on Purchase Intention

In light of influencer marketing, studies suggested that when consumers place their trust in a specific influencer, they are more likely to act favourably towards the product or brands endorsed by the influencer (Balaban & Mustătea, 2019; Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2020). This assertion finds support in recent studies (e.g., Ismagilova et al., 2020b; Koay et al., 2022; Yılmazdoğan et al., 2021), which definitively confirmed a noteworthy association between trustworthiness and intention to purchase. Despite the general agreement on the positive impact of trustworthiness on the intention to purchase, contradictory findings were also yielded in proving trustworthiness as an antecedent of purchase intention (e.g., AlFarraj et al., 2021; Lou & Yuan, 2019). Essentially, these studies justified the findings because individuals perceive SMIs' content as paid advertising, resulting in doubts about their credibility in shaping purchasing decisions. Nonetheless, these explanations somehow imply that

it is essential for SMIs to build trust among their followers to influence their purchase intention positively. Hence, based on the literature, we propose that:

H1: The trustworthiness of TikTok influencers positively affects consumers' purchase intention.

The Effects of TikTok Influencers' Expertise on Purchase Intention

Expertise, encompassing knowledge, competence, and practical skills, is critical in determining source credibility (Ohanian, 1990; Van Der Waldt & Wehmeyer, 2009). Experts, characterised by their deep domain understanding and practical experience, generally possess greater credibility (Muda & Hamzah, 2021). Consumers tend to favour influencers who are perceived as experts in their respective fields and are more likely to exhibit a greater willingness to purchase products when they are endorsed by influencers who possess a visible level of knowledge and hands-on experience with the endorsed product (Chetioui et al., 2020; Koay et al., 2022; Weismueller et al., 2020). However, it is noteworthy that not all studies support this notion (Ismagilova et al., 2020b; Pornpitakpan, 2004b). Therefore, the variability of previous research findings makes it necessary to revisit the subject of SMIs' expertise to gain a deeper understanding of its impact on the perception of credibility and consumers' trust, which eventually can affect consumers' intent to purchase; thus, we posit that:

H2: The expertise of TikTok influencers positively affects consumers' purchase intention.

The Effects of TikTok Influencers' Attractiveness on Purchase Intention

Physical attractiveness involves facial appearance and the degree to which a person's facial features are pleasing to observe (Patzer, 1983). It is often linked to a person's favourable appearance and is important in shaping first impressions (Ohanian, 1990). According to Zhu et al. (2022), individuals tend to associate physical attractiveness with positive traits, such as intelligence, integrity, and genuine concern for others, leading to a more positive perception of brands or products that an attractive person on social media endorsed. Additionally, studies have consistently shown that consumers tend to favour products endorsed by influencers perceived as physically attractive (Gong & Li, 2017), and this is especially noticeable when products are related to physical appearance (Muda & Hamzah, 2021; Munnukka et al., 2016). Despite that, several studies revealed a more intricate perspective (e.g., Koay et al., 2022; Yılmazdoğan et al., 2021), suggesting no direct relation between attractiveness and purchase intention. These diverse outcomes highlight the importance of conducting a thorough examination of how SMIs' attractiveness influences consumers' intention to purchase; thus, we postulate the following hypothesis:

H3: The attractiveness of TikTok influencers positively affects consumers' purchase intention.

Research Framework

Figure 1 presents the research framework and the hypotheses derived from the literature review.

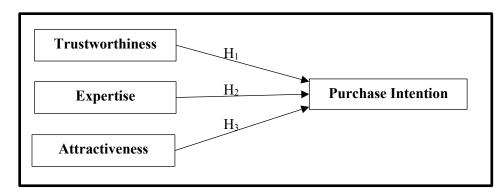


Figure 1: Research Framework

METHODOLOGY

This research employs a quantitative research design to validate the hypotheses proposed. The data were collected via a self-administered online survey on Google Forms. This method was chosen based on the assumption that the respondents should have access to the Internet. Furthermore, to ensure the reliability and validity of the measuring scales, we conducted questionnaire pretesting, including experts' reviews by three experts from Universiti Teknologi MARA and respondents' debriefing prior to the actual data collection.

The target respondents of this study are female TikTok users aged 18 to 34 years. This study focused on female participants, given that females are primary consumers of cosmetic products. The respondents were determined through the purposive sampling method, in which they were sampled based on two criteria which is firstly, they must follow at least one TikTok influencer that has featured local cosmetic products in their TikTok videos, and secondly, they should not have purchased a local cosmetic product because it had been recommended by a TikTok influencer before. The online questionnaire was distributed through social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp. One hundred forty-three (143) usable data were obtained from the data collection.

This study adopted the measurement items from previously established studies, which were modified and altered to match the context of the current study. The measurement items, which each construct consists of five measurement items for source credibility dimensions (i.e., trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness) and purchase intention, were adapted from Muda and Hamzah (2021). All the items were measured on a 7-point Likert-Scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Finally, the data analyses were conducted using the SmartPLS 4.0 software application (Ringle et al., 2022).

Respondents' Profile

A total of 143 respondents participated in this study. The age distribution of the respondents revealed that a substantial 80.4% (115) of them fell within the age bracket of 18 to 24 years. Regarding the participants' educational background, students comprised the largest subgroup within the sample, with 106 individuals constituting 74.1 % of the total. Also, most of the students had achieved an educational level of STPM/Diploma or equivalent, representing 47.6% (68) of the respondents.

As for TikTok usage, the data shows that a significant number of respondents utilise TikTok for 1 to 2 hours daily (28.7% or 41), while an equivalent of 28.7% of respondents are actively engaged with TikTok for more than 3 hours each day. Furthermore, among the content categories, skincare products garnered the highest viewership on TikTok, attracting the interest of 93% (113) of the respondents. Makeup products followed, representing 72% (103), and fragrances, at 50.3% (72) respectively.

DATA ANALYSIS

Assessment of Measurement Model

This study employs the PLS-SEM technique using SmartPLS 4.0 software, as Ringle et al. (2022) recommended. We assessed the validity and reliability of the measurement model by adhering to the established criteria outlined by Hair et al. (2019) and Ramayah et al. (2018). The indicators include item loadings, Average Variance Extracted (AVE), and Composite Reliability (CR) assessments. Accordingly, the loadings should be at least 0.7, the AVE values should be at least 0.5, and the CR should be at least 0.7.

As shown in Table 1, all loadings were considered acceptable, as all are valued at more than 0.7, except one item (ATT3). Furthermore, all AVE and CR values consistently surpassed the recommended thresholds of 0.5 and 0.7, respectively, indicating that all measurements were reliable and internally consistent within the model. Additionally, the Cronbach Alpha in this study yielded values ranging from 0.893 to 0.956, which surpassed 0.7, indicating high reliability. This further affirmed the efficacy of the constructs in accurately measuring the intended theoretical constructs.

Construct/Items Loadings CR AVE α Trustworthiness TR1 0.912 TR2 0.891 0.934 0.950 0.791 TR3 0.862 TR4 0.922 TR5 0.857 Expertise 0.880 EX1 EX2 0.905 0.942 0.955 0.811 EX3 0.926 EX4 0.914 EX5 0.876 **Attractiveness** 0.850 ATT1 ATT2 0.918 0.893 0.926 0.758 Deleted ATT3 ATT4 0.843 ATT5 0.869 Purchase Intention PI1 0.905 PI2 0.968 0.943 0.956 0.873 PI3 0.939 PI4 0.951 PI5 0.931

Table 1: Measurement Model Analysis

Next, we assessed discriminant validity using HTMT analysis. According to the threshold value stipulated by Henseler et al. (2015) and Franke and Sarstedt (2019), HTMT values should not exceed 0.85, and based on a stricter criterion and lenient mode criterion, the values should be equal to or less than 0.90. The highest value recorded is 0.755, confirming that the respondents could distinguish between variables. In summary, both validity assessments affirm the reliability and validity of the measurement items.

Assessment of Structural Model

Following the recommendations of Hair et al. (2019), this study presented the path coefficients, standard errors, t-values, and p-values for the structural model in Table 2. These statistical measures were generated using a 5,000-sample-resample bootstrapping technique described by Ramayah et al. (2018). It is important to note that, as Hahn and Ang (2017) highlighted, p-values alone should not be the sole determinant in assessing the significance of a hypothesis. Instead, a combination of criteria should be employed, including p-values, confidence intervals, and effect sizes. Table 2 provides a summary of these criteria for evaluating the proposed hypotheses.

Table 2 shows the result of hypothesis testing. According to the results, the direct impact of the source credibility dimensions (i.e., trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness) resulted in R^2 of 0.545 (with Q^2 =0.493). This suggests that all three predictors collectively accounted for 54.5% of the variance in consumers' intention to purchase local cosmetic products. Trustworthiness (H1: β =0.180, p=0.000) and

attractiveness (H3: β =0.051 p=0.013) were found to have a positive and significant relationship with consumers' intention to purchase. Conversely, expertise (H2: β =0.0598, p=0.326) displayed no significant relationship with consumers' purchase intentions.

Relationship	Std Beta	Std Dev	t- value	p- value	BCILL	BCIUL	f²	Supported
TR -> PI	0.180	0.094	6.390	0.000	0.437	0.750	0.364	Yes
EX -> PI	0.598	0.113	0.450	0.326	-0.125	0.245	0.003	No
ATT -> PI	0.051	0.081	2.220	0.013	0.046	0.313	0.053	Yes

Table 2: Results of Hypothesis Testing

DISCUSSION

Our research findings provide strong support for H1, which posited that the trustworthiness of TikTok influencers positively affects consumers' intention to purchase. This result aligns with numerous previous studies (e.g., Balaban & Mustătea, 2019; Chiu & Ho, 2023; Ismagilova et al., 2020; Koay et al., 2022; Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2020; Yılmazdoğan et al., 2021) that have consistently demonstrated the significant association between trustworthiness and the intention to purchase. This suggests that when consumers trust a particular TikTok influencer, they are more inclined to make purchases of the product featured in the influencers' TikTok videos. Moreover, our findings are consistent with the theoretical underpinnings of Source Credibility Theory, which posits that the credibility of the source (in this study, the Tik Tok influencer) significantly enhances the persuasiveness of the message. When consumers perceive an influencer as trustworthy, they are more likely to believe the content posted by the influencer, thereby increasing their purchase intentions. Additionally, the findings of this study resonate with the work of De Veirman et al. (2017), who highlighted the importance of perceived authenticity and trust in influencer marketing. Their research showed that influencers who are perceived as genuine and trustworthy tend to have a more substantial impact on their followers' purchasing decisions. This aligns well with our results, emphasizing that trustworthiness is a critical factor in driving consumers' purchase intentions in the context of TikTok.

Contrary to our expectations, our findings did not support H2, which posited that the expertise of TikTok influencers positively affects consumers' purchase intention. This outcome is consistent with previous research that has yielded contradictory findings (Ismagilova et al., 2020b; Pornpitakpan, 2004b). While it has been established that consumers tend to favour influencers perceived as experts in the respective fields (e.g., Chetioui et al., 2020; Koay et al., 2022; Weismueller et al., 2020), our results indicated that this may not universally translate into increased purchase intention. One assumption of this finding lies in the age and gender of the respondents of this study. Younger females have been associated with cosmetics in the pursuit of beauty. Therefore, they tend to exhibit a higher degree of knowledge and skills in applying and utilising cosmetic products. In this case, influencer expertise on cosmetic products may not be a key driver in increasing the followers' intention to purchase cosmetic products.

Next, our study supports H3, which hypothesised that the attractiveness of TikTok influencers positively affects consumers' purchase intention. The finding is in line with previous research indicating that consumers tend to favour products endorsed by influencers perceived as physically attractive (Chen et al., 2021; Gong & Li, 2017) and that attractiveness plays a significant role, especially when the products are related to physical appearance (Chiu & Ho, 2023; Muda & Hamzah, 2021; Munnukka et al., 2016). Additionally, individuals often associate physical attractiveness with positive traits such as intelligence, integrity, and genuine concern for others (Zhu et al., 2022). This association can lead to a more favourable perception of brands or products endorsed by attractive influencers, thereby increasing consumer intention to purchase. In the context of influencer marketing, TikTok influencer's visual appeal and perceived physical attractiveness are essential factors that can significantly shape

consumers' perceptions and drive purchase intention, particularly when the products being promoted relate to physical appearance.

Theoretical, Methodological, Managerial and Social Implications

In influencer marketing, the Source Credibility Theory has long been applied to understand the impact of celebrity endorsements. However, the influence of social media influencers, particularly on TikTok, has remained relatively unexplored, with most of the research concentrating on platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram. This study bridges this gap by offering empirical support to the role of credibility characteristics in influencer marketing, specifically on TikTok. Conclusively, this profound understanding provides a valuable contribution to existing literature, extending the application of the Source Credibility Theory and Source Credibility Model to the domain of social media influencers.

Additionally, a critical aspect of this study lies in adapting research instruments from prior studies to fit the context of TikTok, a relatively newer and rapidly growing influencer marketing platform. This adaptation involved tailoring measurement items to suit the context of TikTok influencers. More importantly, these measurement items underwent rigorous testing for validity and reliability, affirming that the instruments employed in this study are valid and reliable. Eventually, future studies that wish to examine the credibility traits of social media influencers, specifically TikTok influencers, may consider adopting the measurement items from this study.

For local cosmetic marketing practitioners and brand managers, the implications of this study are significant and practical. The research findings highlight the significance of trustworthiness in positively influencing consumer purchase intention. Therefore, brands seeking to leverage TikTok influencers to represent their products should prioritise influencers who are perceived as trustworthy. They should encourage influencers to maintain transparency and authenticity in their content, including disclosing sponsored posts and being open about their affiliations, as this may enhance the perception of trustworthiness. Moreover, the study highlights the importance of physical attractiveness when endorsing cosmetic products. Consequently, managers can consider recruiting influencers who align with the attractiveness standards to promote their cosmetic products effectively.

Meanwhile, from the viewpoint of societal implications, this study provides valuable insights into the profound impact of TikTok influencers on consumers' purchase intention for local cosmetic products. In an era characterised by the digital transformation of marketing, social media influencers' role as trusted information sources has become increasingly influential. As consumers turn to TikTok influencers for guidance on purchasing decisions, this phenomenon not only empowers consumers to make more informed choices but also signifies a broader shift in consumer behaviour. The study encourages a reflection on the evolving dynamics of information dissemination and consumer trust in the digital age. It highlights the importance of fostering authentic, transparent, and trustworthy influencer-marketing relationships to ensure the integrity of online marketing environments, ultimately promoting consumer trust and well-informed decisions.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While this research has significantly contributed to the existing body of knowledge, the local cosmetic industry, and society, it is important to acknowledge its inherent limitations. Firstly, the primary limitation of this study is its exclusive focus on female cosmetic users despite the burgeoning prevalence of grooming practices among men. Future studies should incorporate male cosmetic users to provide a more inclusive and representative analysis of influencer marketing's effects across genders. Furthermore, the current study focuses solely on TikTok influencers in the Malaysian cosmetic industry, neglecting influencers on other social media platforms. It is recommended that future research expands the scope to include influencers on other social media platforms and extends to a more diverse range of

industries to provide a comprehensive understanding of influencer marketing. Additionally, the study used a cross-sectional design, which may not capture the dynamics of influencer marketing over time. Therefore, future studies should consider longitudinal or experimental designs to examine the long-term effects of influencer credibility on consumer behaviour and purchase intentions. Besides that, the context of this research is specific to the Malaysian cosmetic industry, limiting the generalisability. Future research may consider replicating this study in different cultural contexts and geographical locations to assess the universality of influencer marketing effects. Furthermore, in this era of technological advancement, TikTok's features and algorithms are subject to change. Future research should adapt to the platform changes to understand how they affect influencer marketing dynamics.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT AND FUNDING

We want to acknowledge the funding provided by Universiti Teknologi MARA, grant number 600-RMC/GIP 5/3 (025/2023), for supporting this research.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Bernadine Adel Sitorus took the lead in writing the manuscript as part of her MSc thesis under the guidance of both supervisors, Sylvia Nabila Azwa Ambad and Cynthia Robert Dawayan. These involved tasks ranging from writing and data collection to analysis and conclusion. As the corresponding author, Sylvia Nabila Azwa Ambad led the article submission and review process. Cynthia Robert Dawayan was responsible for proofreading and ensuring writing style consistency. All authors contributed critical feedback and played a role in shaping the research, analysis, and manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DECLARATION

We certify that the article is the Authors' and Co-Authors' original work. The article has not received prior publication and is not under consideration for publication elsewhere. This research/manuscript has not been submitted for publication, nor has it been published in whole or in part elsewhere. We testify to the fact that all Authors have contributed significantly to the work, validity, and legitimacy of the data and its interpretation for submission to Jurnal Intelek.

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